PUPO DI ZUCCHERO - LA FESTA DEI MORTI
THE SUGAR STATUETTE - THE DAY OF DEAD

INTERVIEW WITH EMMA DANTE

What does the "sugar statuette" of the title refer to?

Emma Dante: The sugar statuette is a typical element of the day of the dead celebration as it is practiced in southern Italy. On the eve of 2 November, you set the table using the most beautiful tablecloths in the house with biscuits and victuals prepared specifically for the dead, with at the centre a colourful sugar statuette depicting a ballerina, a soldier, or a paladin, typical figures of the traditional art of southern Italy. When night comes, the dead of the family—parents, uncles, aunts—come eat the food left for them and bring in exchange gifts for the children. The next morning, the whole family goes to visit the dead in the cemetery, while the younger play with their new toys. *Pupo di zucchero* borrows its form from this ceremony: its main character, a lonely old man, prepares to celebrate the day of the dead by creating a sugar doll, to evoke the memories of his loved ones. It's a very important tradition in southern Italy, one I think is very beautiful. But nowadays, it is being replaced by Christmas as a holiday for children, and the dead have been replaced by Santa Claus. I think it's a big loss. Santa Claus is a puppet, a mere disguise; it's no one. Whereas when a child receives a gift from an aunt or a grandmother, it's a way to keep in contact with this person they may or may not have known. Year after year, celebration after celebration, gift after gift, the relationship with the dead grows as the child does. They won't ever forget them, even once they've become adult: the dead will remain part of their life.

Why did you want to bring this ceremony to the stage?

I wanted to work on the exercise of memory. Us westerners have a terrible relationship to death, we keep it at bay and have even made it taboo. But this holiday is the opportunity to reconvene with our dead, as at a big family gathering. I find that very affecting, as I've experienced a number of very difficult losses which have always influenced my life—loved ones who passed away very young. I started writing for the theatre after my mother's death. I felt that those premature deaths were a marker in my history, I didn't want to forget them; theatre therefore became for me the place of this reunion, so I wouldn't die of loneliness. Just like the day of the dead, theatre is at once a celebration and a gym for memory, a place where one can train to keep the memory of those who've left alive. A sort of secular church—the only one where a non-believer like me can pray! I felt the need to transform through theatre the pain of loss, of absence, into something magical. Because death can be magical. In some countries like Mexico, the day of the dead always coincides with an explosion of life. It is a fundamental condition of existence—a tragic event for sure, but also something extraordinary, which we must welcome. Without it, everything that makes our lives would be much too superficial. That's what this show is about: by thinking about his whole family, the old man brings back to life the dead he never forgot. They're there, in that house, not as ghosts but as a material presence, as material as a table or a chair. And their condition doesn't prevent them from creating moments of elation or happiness on stage, such as when the three sisters who died of typhus play under their bed, in their brightly-coloured clothes. For those of us whose loves ones are gone, family reunions can be moments of sadness; but what if they came back? I like the idea that this could be a very joyful celebration, specifically because the dead are much more numerous than the living.

This family is at once anchored in a very specific culture and cosmopolitan, in particular through their use of language. How did you work on those two aspects?

When I started working on the show, I wanted to base it on tales written by Neapolitan author Giambattista Basile (1566-1632), who find their roots in the traditions of southern Italy—like this sugar statuette, which is the basis for one of his tales. I ended up drifting away from this material, but I wanted there to remain a trace of it by using the same language, a Neapolitan dialect from the 16th and 17th centuries. It's this dialect the main character speaks, but it's not the only language in the show. For in this family, as in every family in the world, there are foreigners: the father married a Frenchwoman, a Spaniard fell in love with one of the sisters… and each of those characters speaks his or her own language. I like this dialogue between different cultures. While they're deeply anchored in the traditions of southern Italy, this family is open to the outside world—like the father, a sailor who takes to the sea to see the world—and you can see it in the actors, too. Whether they're from Italy, France, or Ivory Coast, they all have their own way of using their voices, of moving. What's beautiful here is the way each of their specific characteristics enters in a dialogue with the others': diversity doesn't create distance, but makes all of them richer for it. And *Pupo di zucchero* is about something that we can all relate to. Wherever we come from, we'll all end up worm food: decomposition is a universal process. The show is therefore based on my roots, but to tell something that's part of the life and death of all human beings.

You asked sculptor Cesare Inzerillo to create works specifically for this show. What's the relationship between your respective artistic worlds?

Cesare Inzerillo is a Palermitan artist whose work revolves a lot around the theme of death. There's a great complicity between my theatre and his world: both of us speak of obsessions. When I decided to write about the day of the dead, I immediately thought of him. His sculptures are reminiscent of the embalmed bodies you can see in the Capuchin Catacombs in Palermo, as if they'd been consumed by death. But it's not so much the macabre aspect of his work I'm interested in; what I like is that he manages to turn death into something poetic. There's always something of life in the way he tells it: each body still retains an element from its prior existence, and in that way they can't be dehumanised and manage to retain their own identity, their soul. In *Pupo di zucchero*, the dead are always mentioned through the habits and obsessions that defined them when they were alive. Cesare Inzerillo tried to find a unique characteristic for each of them, which he then incorporated into a plastic representation of their dead bodies. After seeing those characters alive on stage, we see them fossilised in their nature as corpses, but also in the obsessions that were theirs when they were alive. At the end of *Pupo di zucchero*, the stage is transformed into an installation, a baroque painting following the tumult that came before. Where there once were a multitude of characters filling the space of the stage, the old man finds himself all alone again, surrounded by inanimate statues with, still at the centre of the table, this colouful sugar doll. Because that's also what the show is about. Just like you have to talk about death to talk about life, I needed to fill this house with people—dead people—to talk about the loneliness of those left behind. The loneliness of the living.

Interview conducted by Marie Lobrichon the 28th February 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach